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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON, GRACE ISABEL COLBRON, F. M. COLBY AND
HENRY JAMES FORMAN.

"THE SERVANT IN THE HOUSE."*

MR. CHARLES RANN KENNEDY'S extraordinary play, "The Servant in the House," which is enjoying a prosperous career at the Savoy Theatre in New York, has just been published in reading form and is thereby made accessible to readers throughout the country. Like all good plays, "The Servant in the House" was intended primarily for production; and there can be no doubt that the success of the play in the theatre is to some extent due to the fact that it is being acted by the ablest company of players which could be assembled for its special purpose. Yet the play reads as well as it acts, and is worthy of studious consideration in and for itself. It presents a novel, daring and momentous theme; it exhibits an interesting group of characters drawn, for the most part, with a profound sense of life; it is compact, direct and masterly in structure; it is elevated and often eloquent in style.

The action passes, early on a spring morning, in the living-room of an English country vicarage. The lives of all the little group of people who constitute the Vicar's family are jangled, out of tune and harsh. The Vicar knows his life to be a lie, because he has attained preferment mainly by trampling down his brother Robert. The latter, dejected and embittered by injustice, has sunk to the lowest levels of life. The Vicar's wife has been led astray by an inordinate ambition to advance her husband in society. Her brother, the Lord Bishop of Lancashire, is an abject slave of Mammon, a worshipper of worldliness.

* "The Servant in the House." A Play of the Present Day, in Five Acts. By Charles Rann Kennedy. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1908.

Robert's little girl, Mary by name, has been taken from him by his brother and brought up in the Vicar's house; but she is unsatisfied and perturbed, because all knowledge of her father (whom, in her dreams, she idolizes) has been hidden from her. Each of these people is, in spirit, tangled and awry, because each has left the path of truth and wandered into error.

The play shows how all these tangled lives are straightened out (excepting only that of the Bishop, who is already damned) by the ministrations of a servant from the East, named Manson, whose character is a replica of that of Jesus Christ. It is explained that this servant, who has appeared quietly and unannounced, is a long-lost brother of the Vicar and Robert, who has lived for many years in India, and who there (as the Bishop of Benares) has organized a mighty Church; it is also hinted that he may be the Messiah reincarnate. By the influence of his presence, divinely human and humanly divine, he leads the other characters out of error into truth, and prepares them to take up, in the spirit of brotherhood and love, the lives that God intended them to live.

This lofty theme is handled, for the most part, in a lofty way. Occasionally, however, the reader is made to feel a certain incongruity between the spirit and the letter of a scene. But this defect, it seems to me, can hardly be avoided in any play which presents a romantic story in a realistic guise. Whenever events which have the very look and tang of actuality are employed to suggest a meaning symbolic and remote, it is very difficult indeed to harmonize the two appeals so intimately that they will produce upon the mind an impression which is single. Either the symbol will be dominant and will give the lie to actuality, or else the sense of actuality will overwhelm and crush the symbol. This inevitable discord between the two concomitant appeals is to a great extent avoided in Mr. Kennedy's drama; but every now and then it makes itself evident. The Bishop is merely a type of overemphasized depravity, set up to be satirized. In the last act, Robert is unpleasant at unnecessary length in his description of the symbolic drains and cesspools and charnel horrors beneath the foundations of the church. Here and there throughout the play an occasional line sounds violently out of character. For instance, when Mary, referring to the Bishop of Benares, says to Manson (who is himself the Bishop),

"Think of the very biggest person you ever heard of in this world," Manson replies, "In *this* world: that sounds rather like—— Does he give free libraries?" Surely a remark so ephemeral and trivial in its satire is out of keeping with the character. Also, every now and then, the author does the talking for a speech or two, instead of allowing his characters to speak for themselves. This is especially true in the frequent diatribes of the Vicar, which sometimes degenerate into rhetoric and rant. The Vicar's wife, it seems to me, is wrongly drawn. The one trait of her nature which is emphasized at the outset is her extreme devotion to her husband,—a quality for which we like her; and even though the Vicar and the author hurl against her their collaborate thunders of disapproval, we persist in liking her, until in the fourth act (which surely is too late) she reveals a real obliquity. But these defects are minor, and are matters of detail. In Manson the author has entirely succeeded in the tremendous task of recreating the character of the Christ. Robert is a heroic figure in both his phases,—heroic first in his rebellion against the violent injustice of the world, heroic later in his realization of the labor he is destined to accomplish. Mary is sweetly and sympathetically drawn,—childlike, eager, faltering and tremendously wise.

The play is scarcely less remarkable in manner than it is in matter. It is constructed with an absolute compactness. The action passes in one room, and is entirely continuous. Each of the five acts begins precisely at the point where the preceding act left off. The author also has maintained a careful symmetry in his apportionment of parts. Six out of the seven characters are very nearly equal in importance, and their lines are almost equal in extent. In confining himself to such restricted unity of place and time and to such a symmetry in the allotment of the lines, the author imposed upon himself a task of extraordinary difficulty; but his success in accomplishing this self-inflicted labor adds undeniably to the impression of totality which we derive from his achievement.

Finally, the mere writing of this play stands, in the main, upon a level with the masterly structure and the momentous theme. Perhaps the best evidence of the poetry which pervades and frequently exalts the lines is given by a speech of Manson's in the second act, describing the Church that he has founded:

"You must understand, this is no dead pile of stones and unmeaning timber. It is a living thing. . . .

"When you enter it, you hear a sound—a sound as of some mighty poem chanted. Listen long enough, and you will learn that it is made up of the beating of human hearts, of the nameless music of men's souls—that is, if you have ears. If you have eyes, you will presently see the church itself—a looming mystery of many shapes and shadows, leaping sheer from floor to dome. The work of no ordinary builder! . . .

"The pillars of it go up like the brawny trunks of heroes: the sweet human flesh of men and women is moulded about its bulwarks, strong, impregnable: the faces of little children laugh out from every corner-stone: the terrible spans and arches of it are the joined hands of comrades; and up in the heights and spaces, there are inscribed the numberless musings of all the dreamers of the world. It is yet building—building and built upon."

Surely this play is literature, as well as being drama. It deserves to be seen; it deserves also to be read. The volume under consideration presents it very legibly,—the absence of italics in the stage directions being conservative of continuity in the reading. It is illustrated very beautifully with photographs of every character by Alice Boughton, and is dedicated by the author to Walter Hampden, whose revelation of the rôle of Manson has made possible the salutary appeal of the play to the public in the theatre.

CLAYTON HAMILTON.

"MEMOIRS OF THE COMTESSE DE BOIGNE."*

THROUGH two good-sized volumes—and a third is promised shortly—Adèle d'Osmond, Comtesse de Boigne, chats pleasantly of the things and people that she has seen in the course of a long life. The Countess moved about rather freely among the great social centres of Europe, and was accounted a traveller in a day when women travelled little. As was natural, she never got beyond the limits of her own class, and the rest of the world was a sealed book to her, of which she could read no more than the lettering on the cover. But within these limitations the fair writer saw much, and lived through events that have become part of history. There were many things and many people in her life worth writing about, and, being a true woman, she writes best about the people.

* "Memoirs of the Comtesse de Boigne." Edited from the original MSS. by M. Charles Nicoullaud. First two volumes, 1781 to 1814, and 1815 to 1819. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.